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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 004441

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: CHARGE PUSHES ASSISTANT FM HARD ON SECURITY IN
WAKE OF EMBASSY ATTACK

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

11. (C) Summary: Following the armed attack on the embassy September 12, Charge met with Assistant FM Ahmad Arnous, to press the SARG on his concerns about security for the embassy. Charge urged the SARG to be transparent and to offer full cooperation on the investigation including through better intelligence sharing on threat information. He asked for a senior security service contact point for RSO. He also pressed the SARG to close the streets around the Embassy, especially the street by which the attackers were able to drive an explosives-laden vehicle up to the back entrance of the embassy. Arnous expressed relief that there was no loss of life and satisfaction that the security services had responded quickly and effectively, but he provided no assurances on the specific requests made by the Charge. In a follow-up telecon, the MFA Director of Protocol provided the Charge with a POC on security issues. RSO is determining how useful this contact is. End Summary.

12. (C) In the wake of the September 12 armed attack on the Embassy, Charge met with SARG Assistant FM Ahmad Arnous at his office to press HQ on the need for the SARG to provide better security for the Embassy. Charge underlined to Arnous his extreme concern at the attack, noting that if the explosive device in the van at the back embassy gate had detonated, there would likely have been significant loss of life. Charge expressed appreciation for the quick response from Syrian security forces and for the real-time consultation on the scene provided to him by Minister of Interior Bassam Abdul Majeed but noted that the attack underscored the vulnerability of the embassy. In addition, the Charge urged the SARG to cooperate with Embassy security personnel and other USG personnel who will be focused on investigating this attack and to provide a senior POC for RSO. Finally, the Charge pressed Arnous hard to close streets around the embassy, particularly the side street by which the attackers had been able to approach the back gate of the Embassy, noting that the Embassy had requested repeatedly in the past that this and other streets adjacent to the Embassy be closed for security reasons.

13. (C) Arnous responded to the Charge's points by expressing regret for the attack as well as his government's relief that there was no loss of life and reiterated that the SARG was committed to protecting the U.S. Embassy and all diplomatic missions in Damascus, viewing the commitment as part of its obligations under the Vienna Convention and in Syria's self-interest as well. Arnous expressed his relief that the Syrian security forces responded quickly, hinting that they had to some extent even prevented the completion of the attack, a point that prompted Charge to interrupt and reiterate that the only thing that prevented the attackers from causing serious casualties was the failure to detonate of the explosive device in the van that stopped in front of the back gate.

14. (C) Arnous noted that the attack was under investigation and speculated that the people involved could have been part of " sleeper cells " or terrorist cells, while expressing his conviction that Syrian security services would address the threat such groups posed. Arnous asked Charge for any Embassy security photos or film footage of the attackers, prompting the Charge to press Arnous for full cooperation, a higher-level liaison between the SARG Ministry of Interior and Embassy's RSO, which could possibly include sharing any requested film, as well as for intelligence sharing on the incident and on other threat information. Arnous' response to this and similar urgings was to note that the Charge should stay in close contact with the MFA Director of Protocol, the Embassy's designated POC at the Q. Charge pushed back, noting that neither he nor the Director of Protocol were security or intelligence experts and neither should be expected to investigate terrorist incidents or

evaluate threat information.

15. (C) Arnous subsequently added that the security services would be re-evaluating the security of the Embassy in light of this attack. Elaborating, he noted that a security commQee had been formed that would recommend additional security measures as warranted. Arnous made that point several times that the SARG is focused on the security of all diplomatic missions in Damascus. The Charge took the point but reminded Arnous that this attack had specifically

DAMASCUS 00004441 002 OF 002

targeted Americans at the Embassy. Arnous did not provide much reassurance on the street closure issue, insisting that the SARG would not close the street but would beef up security to control access to the street. (Note: The small side street Atta al-Ayoubi branches off of the main street, al-Mansour, that passes in front of the street. Past the Embassy, al-Ayoubi passes in front of the office of senior VP advisor Mohammed Nassif Khairbek.)

16. (C) Charge closed the meeting by reiterating his extreme concern about the security of the embassy and our personnel and that we expected full cooperation on all details of the attack. In a follow-up telecon, the MFA Director of Protocol provided the Charge with a POC and phone number for the RSO. RSO is determining how useful this contact is.

CORBIN